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 OREG 1 Peace Corps
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A Peace Corps Volunteer's Disillusionment

When I and my fellow Peace Corps Volunteers to Chile arrived in Santiago, Chile, in 1965, we were greeted with a banner headline in one of the afternoon papers, "Forty-Seven Agents of the C.I.A. Arrive at Airport Today."

At the time I saw the paper's story as at best something of a sick joke. "Us spies for the C.I.A.? None of us signed up to spy on anyone! We were in Chile as representatives of the people of the United States . . . we came to live with the Chileans, to understand their country and culture and to lend a hand in attacking the problems of economic and social development at the grass roots."

For two years we attempted to do just that; many of us all the while thoroughly puzzled and sometimes angered at the continued insistence of elements of Chile's political left that we were agents and spies for the C.I.A. Many of us never quite understood why this charge kept surfacing and simply chalked it up to some sort of overly active and slightly perverse version of extremist imagination.

During my stay I learned respect for Chile, her people, her traditions and institutions — this was, after all, one of the principal goals of the Peace Corps Act whose authority underwrote my two years overseas. Before I returned to the U.S., it was clear to me that in the sense of the political outlook of this country, Chile in the middle '60s had an open and democratic political system given to tolerance for the politics of the right, left and center.

Toward the end of the decade the people of Chile, exercising their political rights in strict conformity with their established laws and institutions, elected a Socialist President, Salvador Allende Gossens, whose stated goal was to lead Chile to socialism via constitutional means. As the record of the ensuing years shows, he found this task impossible to accomplish. There are those who maintain, and not without reason, that Allende himself put Chile's political institutions in great jeopardy. However, that point of view deals with potentialities, with possibilities, because the democratic process continued uninterrupted during his term of office. Congressional and municipal elections were held, apparently as openly contested as ever. Political parties across the spectrum of Chilean political life maintained their vigor.

In any case Allende is dead now and Chile is in the hands of a rightist military dictatorship. There are no elec-

tions, no political parties, no freedom of speech or the press. Those are accomplished facts, not potentialities. And if the military spokesmen are to be taken at their word, they are not going to permit a return to even a truncated version of Chile's past form of political life in the near future, perhaps not even within the decade. To their minds, it seems, elimination of Socialists and Communists did not really get at the core of their country's political difficulties. A more general approach was needed, i.e. the entire elimination of the democratic process.

What puzzles and angers me now is not so much that a military regime controls Chile, for that is primarily a matter of direct concern for Chilean citizens. However, after reading the details of how the C.I.A., as a matter of policy decided at the highest levels of our government, expended several million dollars in attempting to subvert, corrupt and destroy the political institutions of the Republic of Chile, I do see why many well-meaning Chileans might have thought that the Peace Corps was in their country as an arm of the C.I.A. Apparently the men charged with conducting our foreign policy are capable of almost anything in the name of expediency, but eight or nine years ago this fact was not so evident to me. At that time the leftist judgment of the Peace Corps seemed just too ludicrous for serious consideration. Although I emphasize that I still have no reason to believe that any volunteers were conscious tools of that agency, what could be more bizarre than the facts of the C.I.A.'s actual involvement?

Not incidentally, all of this was happening while hundreds of thousands of young men of the United States were being sent to another corner of the globe to "fight for the forces of freedom and democracy in Southeast Asia" . . . or so Presidents Johnson and Nixon and their secretaries of state would have had us believe.

As regards Chile, of course, we are able to take comfort from Dr. Kissinger's assertions that our policy toward the Allende government was designed to aid the "democratic, pro-U.S. forces in Latin America."

How strange. Alas, if it only were 1964 instead of 1974. Then I might not find all this double-think/double-talk so disquieting.

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